

DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

Communicable Disease Control

Hepatitis B (serum hepatitis)

What is hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B (formerly known as serum hepatitis) is a liver disease caused by a virus. More than 50 cases are reported in Montana each year.

Who gets hepatitis B?

Anyone can get hepatitis B, but those at greater risk include:

- X drug abusers who share needles:
- X certain health care workers who have contact with infected blood:
- X homosexual males, particularly those with multiple partners:
- X clients and staff in custodial care (in settings such as developmental centers):
- X hemodialysis patients:
- X household and sexual contacts of an infected person.

How is the virus spread?

Hepatitis B virus can be found in the blood and, to a lesser extent, saliva, semen and other body fluids of an infected person. It is spread by direct contact with infected body fluids: usually by needle stick injury or sexual contact. Hepatitis B virus is not spread by casual contact.

What are the symptoms of hepatitis B?

The symptoms of hepatitis B include fatigue, poor appetite, low fever, vomiting and occasionally joint pain, hives or rash. Urine may become darker in color, and then jaundice (a yellowing of the skin and whites of the eyes) may appear. Some individuals may experience few or no symptoms.

How soon do symptoms appear?

The symptoms may appear six weeks after exposure, but usually within two to three months.

For how long is a person able to spread the virus?

The virus can be found in blood and other body fluids several weeks before symptoms appear and generally persists for several months afterward. Approximately 90% of infants infected at birth, 50% of children infected at 1-5 years of age, and 10% of infected adults may become long-term carriers of the virus, capable of spreading it to others.

What is the treatment for hepatitis B?

Alpha interferon is the only licensed drug for treatment of chronic hepatitis B in the United States. Studies show the drug is successful in 40% of the cases.

What precautions should hepatitis B carriers take?

Hepatitis B carriers should follow standard hygienic practices to ensure that close contacts are not directly contaminated by his or her blood or other body fluids. Carriers must not share razors, toothbrushes or any other object that may become contaminated with blood. In addition, susceptible household members, particularly sexual partners, should be immunized with hepatitis B vaccine. It is important for carriers to inform their dentist and health care providers.

How can hepatitis B be prevented?

A vaccine to prevent hepatitis B has been available for several years. It is safe, effective, and is recommended for all infants, adolescents 11-12 years of age, and high-risk adolescents and adults. A special hepatitis B immune globulin is also available for people who are exposed to the virus. In the event of exposure to hepatitis B, consult a doctor or the local health department.